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# The EPA has a duty to protect aquifers

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In a recent op-ed, the executive director of the [Texas Mining and Reclamation Association](#) argued that "inconsistencies in Environmental Protection Agency regulations are hampering our ability to access Texas' uranium reserves and are making it nearly impossible for companies to operate."

We represent Goliad County in a dispute over uranium mining and groundwater contamination, and we challenge the accuracy of that piece.

In Goliad County, where one proposed uranium mining operation is seeking EPA approval, groundwater is the sole source for water supply. If the drinking water were to be contaminated by uranium mining, there would be *no* surface water alternative. There are about 5,000 water wells used for residential, domestic and livestock purposes in Goliad County. There are approximately 50 wells within 1 kilometer (0.6 miles) of the proposed mining boundary, with many more within two miles.

And make no mistake about it - uranium mining is a direct, potential threat to drinking water. In uranium mining, a mining solution is injected directly into the freshwater aquifer at the same depth of local drinking water wells, releasing uranium and radioactive radium along with other pollutants into the aquifer. Although requirements exist that mandate clean-up after mining, variances from clean-up requirements are routinely granted by the [Texas Commission on Environmental Quality](#), the state uranium mining regulator. This, of course, results in far worse water quality after the mining is over.

Uranium mining is not like hydraulic fracturing for natural gas, where injection of solution occurs at depth below the water table. Instead, in uranium mining, the aquifer is *the* target of the mining activity.

The Texas Mining and Reclamation Association's comments are an attempt to apply pressure on the EPA, which has an oversight responsibility under the federal Safe Drinking Water Act (not the Clean Water Act, as erroneously claimed in the association's op-ed). Under this drinking water protection act, any aquifer to be damaged by uranium solution mining must be specifically exempted by the EPA after a scientific review and a formal administrative action. The congressional directive to EPA is clear. The policy priority is to protect groundwater that people use for drinking water purposes.

By making this public attack on the EPA, the association has initiated the very "vortex of political games" of which it proclaims to be the victim. More importantly, the association's condemnation of the efforts by the qualified EPA scientists, hydrologists and staff to ensure protection of the citizens of Goliad County is irresponsible, and the implication that the EPA is acting pursuant to regulations that are not yet drafted is blatantly incorrect.

The current statute requires that prior to obtaining approval to pollute the aquifer (a so-called aquifer exemption), the applicant for a mining permit must demonstrate that the aquifer "does not currently serve as a source of drinking water." It is pursuant to this requirement that the EPA has requested groundwater modeling to demonstrate that the 50 nearby water wells will not be

threatened by contamination of the aquifer where uranium mining is being proposed. In turn, this issue revolves around whether or not the aquifer is directly connected across the property boundary, the speed of movement of the groundwater and the distance of the mining activity from these adjacent water wells. Among other things, it requires computer modeling of the aquifer.

These are hard issues. Thank goodness the EPA has requested scientific support to help it determine whether the proposed mining complies with the law and is protective of human health. This is what it was created to do. And if you lived near this site and used groundwater, you would be hoping that it does its job well.

As Texans, we have to protect our water supplies. We cannot afford to waste water. We are transitioning from a time when we could survive waste and contamination to a world suffering from massive demand for resources - both energy and water. We need both. One should not be allowed to destroy the other.

We need regulatory agencies that seek answers to hard issues that involve our health and safety. The EPA is doing its job in Goliad County, and we should applaud it rather than attack it. All of us will benefit from policies based on sound science that protect our drinking water and our public health.

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